

Yinde Zhang\*

## The Utopia of the Human: about Ge Fei's *Jiangnan Trilogy*

DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-0017

**Abstract:** Researchers have recently shown a growing interest for studies of anti-utopian fictions in Chinese, highlighting their critical value in history, society, and ideology. However the persistence of the utopian spirit beyond these dystopian representations has often been neglected. The present paper aims to explore this underlying utopianism by focusing on Ge Fei's *Jiangnan Trilogy* (2004–2011), as it forms a significant paradigm on the issue, through an appeal for displacement, pointing out the importance in our reflections of moving from topography into the human dimension. This paper seeks to examine how human utopia is featured both in a literary and contextualized way, by arguing that utopianism is humanism, inherent to the awareness of social and historical crises, as opposed to the myths of Nation, Progress or Prosperity.

**Keywords:** Ge Fei, *Jiangnan Trilogy*, utopia, dystopia, utopia of the human

One can no longer ignore the growing body of dystopian literature published recently in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the rest of the Sinophone world. Undeniably, these spatial and temporal projections carry dark allegories about history and the present day, taking an ironic view of the current harmonious dreams promoted by a powerful state. Their critical awareness, however, has often been misunderstood and perceived instead as the expression of an apocalyptic and fatalist vision, leading to frequent claims about the end of utopia.

Unmistakably the general disenchantment is justified by the disintegration of communist ideology, the devastations wrought by an ultra-liberal economy and the threat of ecological and geopolitical disasters. However, is utopia disappearing, including utopianism which is not linked to any ideological dogma and blueprint but to the human yearning for a better society and life? Does the critique by anti-utopian literature of instrumentalized utopia mean that utopia should nowadays be condemned as monolithic or should we on the

---

\*Corresponding author: Yinde Zhang, CERC, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3, Sorbonne Paris Cité, 17, rue de la Sorbonne, Paris 75005, France. E-mail: yzhang.paris3@gmail.com; yinde.zhang@univ-paris3.fr

contrary recall the need to reconsider it in its plurality and historicity, in particular by emphasizing the persistence of utopianism as social and individual resistance to various forms of repression and alienation? Is it not necessary, in this sense, to redefine utopia less as a demagogic topoelect than as humanistic discourse? This paper attempts to provide some answers to these questions by examining the *Jiangnan Trilogy*, published by Ge Fei 格非 (1964–) between 2004 and 2011,<sup>1</sup> as this dystopian fiction calls for the resurgence of hope, by introducing a displacement that consists of moving utopia from a fallacious perfect society towards a human-centered place, in a historically determined way. Throughout three volumes spanning one hundred years of Chinese contemporary history, the novel calls into question the perversity of modernity through a utopian village called Huajiashe 花家舍, which, however, successively gave rise to a revolution gone wrong, a totalitarian state and consumerist tyranny. This dystopian variation constitutes an allegorical frame of the “ideological” vision of utopia, based, for instance, on myths of nation, progress and prosperity. In parallel, the novel builds on a dichotomous structure where human utopia is opposed to any (anti-)utopian topography, to the extent that the emancipation project underlies the narrative, in favor of social and individual values against political or mercantile powers and their destructive effects.

The present paper seeks to investigate the way the *Jiangnan Trilogy* stages this utopia of the human,<sup>2</sup> which relies on ethics rather than ontology

---

1 Ge Fei's *Jiangnan sanbuqu* 江南三部曲 (*Jiangnan Trilogy*) includes *Renmian taohua* 人面桃花 (Peach Blossom Beauty 2004), *Shanhe ru meng* 山河入梦 (Landscapes in Dream 2007), and *Chunjin Jiangnan* 春盡江南 (End of Spring in Jiangnan 2011). The three volumes were first published separately and then reissued together as a trilogy by the Shanghai Wenyi chubanshe in 2012. Page numbers in this paper refer to the first edition. Cf. Ge Fei 2004, 2007, 2011. All translations are mine.

The title of the first volume hints at a poem by Cui Hu (崔護 fl.796), “Written in a Village South of the Capital”

This very day last year, oh, at this very place  
A pretty face outshone the flowers of peach trees  
I do not know today where shines the pretty face  
Only the pretty flowers smile in vernal breeze

Cf. Songs of the Immortals. An Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry 1994: 70.

2 We borrow the notion from Emmanuel Levinas who declares in “Socialism and Utopia” (1995): “In the presence of certain acts of resistance and martyrdom, daringly carried out in our world in the name of the pure human, the utopian human, against the efficacy of powers and powerful political entities, that ethics affirms its objective status, shows itself to be *Wirklichkeit*, efficient reality, and no longer lets itself be repressed among the powerless ‘beautiful souls’ or ‘unhappy consciousnesses’. In any case, it would be, beyond the

contributing to a misleading fairyland. A double approach, both thematic and chronological – Huajiashe’s representation and its consecutive variant will come under close scrutiny – could apply to the study of this work, in so far as its utopian imagination of human beings is inscribed in the core of historical and social crisis. If utopianism is humanism, as we would argue, it takes here a clearly contextualized shape, which requires that the strain between fictional construct and social discourse is taken into account; thereby it opens up a multitude of meanings, including a network of interrogations and incoherence. Rather than identifying the human dimension of utopia as an alternative certainty against disastrous topicality, this essay aims to point out the coexistence of hope and pessimistic moments as the author’s constant oscillation between doubts and quest corroborates utopia’s inherent ambivalence between negations and possibilities, such as defined by Adorno.<sup>3</sup>

## 1 Desire and historical temporality

The first attempt to build a human utopia is reflected in a deshistoricizing writing, as attested by the initial volume, *Peach Blossom Beauty*. The author engages in a private narrative to transform history, for instance the background around the 1911 Revolution, into intimate experiences undergone by the protagonist Xiumi 秀米 who reaches puberty at the beginning of the story. This metaphorization of desire certainly expresses the author’s intention to rid himself of the established genre of the “novel of the future”, such as the one inaugurated by Liang Qichao in 1902, still reappropriated by propaganda a century later as prophetic literature,

---

contribution of utopian socialism analyzed by Buber, the *credo* of his own philosophical anthropology in which the relation of the human to his neighbor is conceived of on the famous model of ‘I and Thou’, distinct from the objectification and the domination that always triumphs in the eyes of the objective gaze. The ‘I-Thou’ model allows us to conceptualize a firm distinction between the society and the State, and to conceive a society without ‘powers.’” Levinas 1999: 116–117. Cf. also Chalier 1993.

3 “Utopia is essentially in the determined negation, in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what should be”. “Something’s missing: A Discussion between Ernest Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing”, in Ernst Bloch 1989: 12. As pointed out by David Wang in the conclusion of his essay on the last volume of the trilogy: “It would not be impossible for the poet to write out a utopia from the waste land, at another turning point”. (但在時間的另一個轉折點上詩人未嘗不可能寫出荒原裡的烏托邦) Cf. Wang 2013: 51. Jeffrey C. Kinkley delivers a different standpoint, by stressing the dystopian temporal cyclicalism that seems to feature Ge Fei’s work. Cf. Kinkley 2014: 110–117.

legitimizing the renaissance of the nation. However, by emphasizing personal impulsive desire as a counter-weight to teleological utopia, the novel raises the question of how to avoid at the same time any risk of undialectical consciousness facing historical temporality which is indispensable for any human experience as well as any perspective of possibilities.

This deshistoricizing writing<sup>4</sup> leaning towards a human-centered space is grounded in a binary and oppositional spatial construction between a fulfilled utopian site and an oneiric heterotopia. At the very beginning of its existence, Huajiashe appears to be located on a remote island, like an earthly Paradise, which seemed to be dominated by peace, equality and abundance. Inspired both by the archetype of the Peach Blossom Spring and the idea of Great Unity, this fulfilled utopia hosts a retired community as well as revolutionary activists, before proving in fact to be a den of bandits who commit frequent acts of violence and destruction. This dystopian representation is explained by the lust for power which sparks bloody rivalry between leaders ready to maintain the hierarchy within the so-called egalitarian community. This cacotopia, which eventually self-destructs, is counterbalanced by another place, which is dreamlike, inexistent and invisible, as it only exists in Xiumi's mind, through a kind of elsewhere of elsewhere that transcends political projects through intimate desires and impulses.

Fascinated by the idea of Great Unity described by Zhang Jiyuan 張季元, the clandestine activist, Xiumi is no doubt sustained by wishes close to some revolutionary proposals when she creates the Autonomous Association of Puji and a school in the town after her journey to Japan,<sup>5</sup> pushing her aspiration as far as an egalitarian society "providing people with the same quantity of smiles".<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, these ephemeral enterprises have little to do with any political project concerning any Chinese future society. They instead follow personal ethics and affectivity which commit Xiumi to charitable work or find her retreat into her innermost feelings. Lacking a proper educational program, her school is more like a hospice for vagabonds or beggars for whom she feels great empathy. The moment that crystallizes her endeavors is when distributing rice porridge one day during a severe period of famine<sup>7</sup> for the scene appears to obliterate for an instant suffering and inequality. Actually, this philanthropic

---

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting the parody process used by Ge Fei who gives biographical notes in brackets for some characters as a guarantee of historical credibility while they are simulacra devices which dismantle the historiographic discourse by strengthening fictional legitimacy.

<sup>5</sup> Ge Fei 2004: 165–167.

<sup>6</sup> Ge Fei 2004: 201.

<sup>7</sup> Ge Fei 2004: 206.

stance dissimulates at times the secrets of the young protagonist's love life. In this respect, *Huajiashe* is diverted from its revolutionary function – a clandestine place of fomenting uprising – into a private signification. The site facilitates the revelation of desire as Xiumi's kidnapping allows her to experience freely her first feelings of love while discovering Zhang Jiyuan's private diary, in which the revolutionary martyr has confessed his veiled passion for the young girl. The detention site becomes an area for reading which offers the pubescent heroine unexpected sentimental education and emotional development.

Nevertheless, the author has no intention of writing any melodrama, as some studies tend to assert in stressing the love story between Xiumi and Zhang Jiyuan, even suggesting an underlying Electra complex. The representation of desire, for the author, is in fact meant to explore more intensively the protagonist's psyche, as her leaning to seclusion and impulsiveness translates a specific form of utopian consciousness which appears to be subject to schizophrenia and cut off from the dialectic.<sup>8</sup>

The dreamlike world that Xiumi builds and lives in is featured as a reclusive and self-sufficient universe. Her favorite dwelling is the closed pavilion where her father found shelter.<sup>9</sup> She feels paradoxically free while she finds herself incarcerated.<sup>10</sup> The tropism to retreat comes closer to a kind of autism since she feigns aphasia while enjoying comparing the human heart to an isolated island.<sup>11</sup>

Such autism results in a considerable spatialized effect of time. Xiumi's psychological temporality exhibits two important characteristics. On the one hand it proves to be regressive as the protagonist is, at the end of the novel, under the impression that a river runs back in time showing her self-image from twenty years ago.<sup>12</sup> The reverse movement joins the morbid flow, as the hallucinatory scene announces her own death which happens when her vanishing father's smiling face looms up out of ice flowers. On the other hand, time reveals its repetitive and circular nature. Her ceaseless activity follows an impulsive and almost mechanical gesture which forbids her to stop being active. In her own words, she does one thing just to forget another<sup>13</sup>; she is fascinated by what is impossible,<sup>14</sup> without any axiological care, as though under a magical influence.<sup>15</sup> To a certain extent, her dynamic refers to the revolution in its

---

8 Gabel 1997: ch. 1, "Utopian and False Consciousness", 61–70. See also Ruyer: 1950.

9 Ge Fei 2004: 160.

10 Ge Fei 2004: 231.

11 Ge Fei 2004: 275.

12 Ge Fei 2004: 276.

13 Ge Fei 2004: 195.

14 Ge Fei 2004: 235.

15 Ge Fei 2004: 196.

astronomical meaning and in its cyclical movement. In fact, this regressive and repetitive temporality highlights a diverging and deteriorated time in so far as it triggers a break in historical time. The latter implies flow and duration, while they are eliminated by obsessive acts, which neither lead to any future nor lead up to its advent.

It is true that the author succeeds in dissociating her aspiration from any political effectiveness by staging Xiumi's "non-realistic" dreams. In parallel, in emphasizing her pathological "fixism" – Xiumi's obsession is perceived by her entourage as silly or foolish (痴), like her father – the author also suggests the limits of utopian consciousness due to its excessive dehistoricizing tendency. When it annihilates the distance between desire and satisfaction, as the heroine seems subject to, it becomes badly undialectical since it tends not only to dismiss all concrete historical situations but the very historical dimension of existence. Therefore the major risk would be to fall into a "reified thought" by substituting quantitative time for qualitative time. That would paradoxically suffocate the possible in the name of doing the impossible.

## 2 Philia as social resistance

The second part of the trilogy turns to a very different optic in addressing the issue, as a salutary otherness has been introduced in the behavior of Tan Gongda 譚功達, Xiumi's son and head of the County Meicheng 梅城. Although he inherits a kind of foolish obsession from Xiumi, this dreamer differs from his mother with his capacity to develop a form of friendship and of "being together", which proves to be a valuable social force against totalitarianism in the new era of socialism.

In an analogous way to the preceding volume, the second occurrence of Huajiashe serves to crystallize criticism of the dystopia. However the author stresses its renewed characteristics by denouncing both totalitarianism and instrumental rationality in terms of their complicity in the establishment of dominating order. The utopian site is thus reborn as an idyllic popular commune, inhabited by slightly more than 1,600 brave souls, undoubtedly in reference to Charles Fourier's Phalanx.<sup>16</sup> Being a closed world, it tends towards

---

<sup>16</sup> "Il faut un peu forcer de nombre dans la phalange d'essai, l'élever à 1900 et 2000, y compris la cohorte salariée, parce qu'elle aura plus de difficultés à surmonter que celles qu'on fondera postérieurement et qu'on réduira d'abord à 1800 et ensuite à 1700 : le nombre fixe étant 1620, qu'il faudra un peu excéder, surtout pendant les premières générations qui manqueront de vigueur." Fourier 1829: 119.

totality and perfection through the institution of a “harmonious” community without division, symbolized by carefully ordered architecture and a mastered administrative organization. Nevertheless, the perfection it invents through this form of totality and closure barely dissimulates the conspicuous lack of freedom for dwellers, who are all serious and wistful, as their lives are entirely controlled by a mystical, invisible personality, the Party secretary Guo Congnian 郭從年, the Big Brother who makes transparent every house, gesture and word. The allusion to an Orwellian universe is easily perceptible as Ge Fei resorts to some signs such as the number 101 to designate the bureau in charge of surveillance.<sup>17</sup>

Not content with the ostracism of such a police state, Ge Fei points out its underlying ideological logic by accusing instrumental rationality of being complicit in the totalitarian mechanism. The novel succeeds in showing this perverted version of modernity, generating a paradoxical process by which the emancipation project is reversed, becoming therefore its contrary,<sup>18</sup> for the whole popular commune suffers from tyrannical laws ratifying the vicious parallel between mastery of nature and domination of humans.

The figuration of the protagonist illustrates Tan Gongda's ambivalent status. As an idealist, he is at least both adept and victim of the system relying on communist and scientific credo. Captivated by progress, as exemplified by the Soviet model, he has made himself a “project man” who never moves without a blueprint in his hand. This frantic administrator-engineer has plunged into numerous more or less feasible enterprises, from the construction of a dam to the canalization of a river or exploration of gas, competing with the ancient mythical hero Yu Gong 愚公<sup>19</sup> in his Promethean actions.<sup>20</sup> The benefits of this necessary modernization work are not to be denigrated. The author's disapproval rather relates to the fact that Tan Gongda, full of confidence in progress,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ge Fei 2007: 276. In 1984, the room 101 is the place where Winston Smith eventually has been rendered submissive. See Orwell 1961 [1949]: 232.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno/Horkheimer 2002.

<sup>19</sup> “The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains” (*Yugong yishan* 愚公移山) is a fable from Chinese mythology about the virtues of perseverance and willpower. Cf. *Liezi*. Mao Zedong cited this legend in the speech he pronounced during the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of CPC, June 11, 1945, re-interpreting it as a call for collective action and transforming it, after 1949, into the official allegory of socialist construction. “Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?”. Cf. Mao Zedong 1945.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the credo expressed by the omnipresent slogan “Man will triumph over nature” or “man can conquer nature” (*ren ding sheng tian* 人定勝天)

ignores the political consequences of utilitarian rationality, triggered by such excessive belief in the infinite powers of reason, as it may transpose the geometrical spirit and mathematical methods into administration if it is deprived of values and finality.

Guo Congnian, the Party secretary and legislator, is the personification of human domination by scientific methods. He applies rational rigor in controlling the population by banning any spontaneous desire and irrational impulse due to their unpredictability. The work he imposes on villagers becomes an interiorized duty unless a punishment for brainwashing intervenes. His assiduous reading of *Thousand and one Nights*, especially the recurrent image of the forbidden doors from the tale “The Man who never Laughed again”, makes explicit an integral legicentrism, which signs the aberrant logic of the alienation of disalienation by ratifying domination of man by man.

What preserves Tan Gongda’s utopian desire from any alliance with power is fortunately another facet of his personality, for instance a “sentimental” one, which conceals his deeply humanistic propensity. The blueprints he continues to draw carry in reality “anti-scientific” marks as they are covered with unreadable numbers, which prove to be less technical data than surprising clues about his affections for Yao Peipei 姚佩佩, his young secretary. His so-called daydreams, “foolishness”, or confusing moments, actually extract him from the danger of objectification and instead redirect him towards human otherness and encounter. The dual posture based on displacement from the sphere of I/it to that of I/Thou<sup>21</sup> permits Tan Gongda to formulate his human utopia by making up the friendship with his neighbor, for instance with Yao Peipei, the pariah in a hugely repressive context.

Under cover of melodrama, Ge Fei describes their affective adventure with an anti-dictatorial feature as their mutual attachment involves friendly solidarity which is transformed into stubborn resistance against political suppression. Yao Peipei is a marginalized young woman who suffers from problematic family origins due to her father accused of being “counter-revolutionary”. She is excluded from the community like K of Kafka’s *Castle*, which Ge Fei has written an excellent essay about.<sup>22</sup> This outcast status recalls a state engaged in creating a society composed only of “new men”, by eliminating any impure element, as though the regime would ensure that revolutionary destruction was also extended to the social fabric. Tan Gongda recklessly opposes this discrimination process as witnessed by the care he takes of the newcomer, in spite of collective animosity. He first recognizes fundamental rights of existence for the victim, by

---

<sup>21</sup> Buber 1937.

<sup>22</sup> Ge Fei 2001: 135–159.



providing her with a job and with housing opportunities. His spontaneous and daring act sketches a community which no longer has any ideological a priori, class prejudice or other identity prerequisite, in substance, a community founded on “whatever singularity”.<sup>23</sup>

Ge Fei underscores the social dimension of this human-based utopia. The encounter and friendship between Tan Gongda and Yao Peipei move towards the necessary being together which would be able to protect the “zoe” or the “bare life” of the people from any kind of exclusion, in favor of the “bios” form favorable to its inclusion. Their common struggle against the stigmata of class heredity reveals a horizontal “philia”, antithetical to the vertical “People-one” imposed by the State-Party. It revives what communism has occulted by the oblivion of its own invention: the existence of the common,<sup>24</sup> characterized by the necessity of being together and living together. Nevertheless, such a commonality defies the myth of symbiotic community as it commands the division of the social. Tan Gongda’s atavistic “foolishness” and Yao Peipei’s impermeable sensitivity prove their irreducible personality and strength which confirm this otherness protected from any political absorption. This common world accompanied by differentiation or by the paradoxical game of proximity/separation sketches a kind of libertarian democracy, which claims the irrevocable retreat of the state in favor of the endless division of the social,<sup>25</sup> in other words, a “place of power vacuum”, which is unlocalizable and definable only by social movements and plurality. It is significant that from volume to volume the “Great Unity” dream seems to be fading to the advantage of the “Peach Blossom Spring” dream, which is no longer synonymous with harmonious totality but with deliberated marginality and reluctant action. Far from a constituted community it is a coming one, inoperative and undetermined,<sup>26</sup> as the liberty that the unfortunate couple aspires to is as fugitive and enchanting as flowing water, shimmering light or wild flowers.

### 3 The Utopian Man

The psychical and ethical aspect, previously underlined, is followed by esthetic preoccupations which appear to be salient in the last volume. The choice of an

---

<sup>23</sup> Agamben 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy 2001: 38.

<sup>25</sup> Abensour 1997: 38–39.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy 1991.

elegiac tone, served by the poet Duanwu 端午, Tan Gongda's son, "loser" and esthete, tend to exhibit a fin-de-siècle pessimism facing the growing commodity society promising a consumer paradise. However within this negative utopia remains a glimmer of hope, as the "obsolete man" is intricately a "utopian man", who is capable of preserving individual integrity from this new form of alienation while resisting a reclusive misanthropic impulse and answering the call for the "unavowable community".<sup>27</sup>

More than in the previous volumes, Huajiashe is given a diabolized frame for its third avatar, which is clearly designed as a dreadful universe, excluding any redemptive counter-model. In the mirror of devastating neo-liberalism and moral disintegration, Huajiashe is featured as a brothel and a "money-squandering den" (*xiaojinku* 銷金窟).<sup>28</sup> This "sweet and rich village" (*wenrou fugui xiang* 溫柔富貴鄉) is a worthy "Eden" (*Yidiyuan* 伊迪園),<sup>29</sup> the only virtue of which is summarized by Zhang Youde 張有德, its founder, in a laconic trisyllabic phrase: "the money comes in fast" (*lai qian kuai* 來錢快). It is not surprising that in a reconstituted Disneyland-like decor, young village women take on multiple roles as guide, actress and prostitute, satisfying any customer in search of debauched pleasure. Nevertheless the author rejects any counter-model facing such sheer hell as he deplores several referential utopian communities. Neither Huaxi village in Jiangsu (Jiangsu Huaxicun 江蘇華西村), nor the Little Ridge village in Anhui (Anhui Fengyang Liyuangongshe Xiaogangcun 安徽鳳陽梨園公社小崗村),<sup>30</sup> both evoked in the same page, could provide examples to follow because of their fallacious prosperity made in the service of propaganda.<sup>31</sup> Even the retreat Lüzhu 綠珠 seeks in Yunnan along with her friends is described as just resulting from fantasies about tourist escape. Ge Fei remains too influenced by Flaubert's unclassifiable novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* to succumb to the temptation of any fulfilled utopia. The internment of Yuanqing 元慶, Duanwu's stepbrother, in the psychiatric hospital he himself constructed in the hope of creating in the very site a haven protected from external aggression expresses ultimately heavy irony.

The author renews his human-centered reflections with a double refusal of both capitalist dystopia and alternative fulfilled utopia. Unlike previous volumes, Ge Fei here resorts to a quasi didactic discourse to complement the narrative. He engages in the "classification of people" – that is one chapter's title – by borrowing viewpoints from the characters. Two categories have been

<sup>27</sup> Blanchot 1988.

<sup>28</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 75, 293–302.

<sup>29</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 76, 308.

<sup>30</sup> New Village in Henan 河南新鄉 (南街村) could be added to those two examples.

<sup>31</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 76.

established in a vigorous antinomy in conformity with various moral criteria. On the one hand there are “useful” people, called “new men” by Feng Yanhe 馮延鶴, chief of the publications bureau in the local records office (*difangzhi bangongshi fuzeren* 地方志辦公室負責人). They demonstrate new opportunism by having taken control of the whole society for thirty years.<sup>32</sup> In Lüzhū’s view, such successful, rich, cynical persons that the very society has produced deserve in fact much more the name of “non-person” 非人, as the young rebel refuses the euphemism to express her denial and hatred.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand are classified “useless persons”, of whom Duanwu, our poet, is paradoxically proud to be one. Harshly judged by his wife Jiayu 家玉 as a “loser”, a “superfluous” man dismissed by society and “rotting at home day by day”,<sup>34</sup> Duanwu deliberately opts for this idle lifestyle, which allows him to care about nothing, spending his time reading, sleeping or listening to music.<sup>35</sup> This intentional apathy unmistakably refers to Zhuangzi’s philosophy, which Feng Yanhe has shed light on through erudite and eccentric exegesis.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 200.

<sup>33</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 228. The term used by Lüzhū is undoubtedly inspired by Mencius: “From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man, that the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man, that the feeling of modesty and complaisance is essential to man, and that the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man”. Cf. *The Works of Mencius*. In fact, the original text systematically uses the negative form to designate this category of “no-man”. Literally, we can read: “Who has not the feeling of commiseration is a no-man...” (由是觀之，無惻隱之心，非人也；無羞惡之心，非人也；無辭讓之心，非人也；無是非之心，非人也。)

<sup>34</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 6–8.

<sup>36</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 3, 47. Feng refers to Confucius, Zhuangzi, as well as Marx. For Confucius: *junzi buqi* 君子不器 (The accomplished scholar is not a utensil), Cf. *The Analects*. For Zhuangzi, “Wuyong zhe wu you, fan ruo bu ji zhi zhou” 無用者無憂，泛若不繫之舟 (Those who are useless are not sad, and aimlessly wander about). It is a modified quotation; the original text: “巧者勞而知者憂，無能者無所求。飽食而遨遊，泛若不繫之舟，虛而遨遊者也。” (The clever toil on, and the wise are sad. Those who are without ability seek for nothing. They eat to the full, and wander idly about. They drift like a vessel loosed from its moorings, and aimlessly wander about). Cf. *Zhuangzi*. For the parody of Marx: “你只有先成為一個無用的人，才能最終成為你自己” (one could become himself only after making himself perfectly useless). It parodies the famous slogan “無產階級只有解放全人類，才能最終解放自己” (The proletariat could emancipate himself only after emancipating all humanity), which itself summarizes Marx’s and Engels’ ideas. Cf. Engels, “Preface to The 1888 English Edition” in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* “... the exploited and oppressed class – the proletariat – cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class – the bourgeoisie – without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinction, and class struggles” Cf. Marx/Engels 1888: 8.

However, Feng Yanhe's wisdom acquires a very critical and modern assertion while summarizing it: "one could not become himself but by making himself perfectly useless", as the uselessness in question is completely recontextualized in response to a society falling into decay.

All these arguments related to current Chinese society and to traditional philosophy sound as weird echoes of the theory of "obsolete man", as already formulated by Günter Anders in the 1930s.<sup>37</sup> Beyond the "superfluous man" invented in the nineteenth century by Turgenev alluding to a type of individual who did not fit into social norms despite their skills and capability, the "obsolete man" is inseparable from "utopian man" as a critical concept serving to condemn technical materialist society. A "technical society", and a fortiori, a post-industrial one, is assimilated to a Land of Cokagne which renders a "utopian man" "obsolete" while seeking to exterminate him since in such a society there is no longer either utopia nor a future, just the current situation that is prolonged. Human beings are not allowed dreams anymore as they are nowadays reserved for the machine that dreams of a megamachine instead. The more people attempt to improve the Land of Cokagne, in the belief of making their own happiness, the more they implement the utopia of the megamachine, contributing thus unconsciously to their own extermination.

Aware of this danger, Duanwu persists in choosing to be a "utopian man". He is "conservative" against progress in the sense that he takes care to safeguard and to preserve the existing world and humanity.<sup>38</sup> He strives to be given an "acosmic freedom", not only by denying the world as it is but also by imagining a world which he deems he has right to. This capacity to refute the world as it is, i. e., that one he found when born, in order to dream up another one,<sup>39</sup> reasserts his human nature in distinguishing him from an animal that can just adapt itself to the environment.

The alternative universe Duanwu envisages consists mostly of art, which not only expresses his willingness to be distanced from the present world, but also reveals his real utopian ethos, insofar as he refrains from substantializing an artistic antidote by considering it an "ungroundable hope".<sup>40</sup> In this respect, Duanwu's approach is both committed and "elitist".

---

<sup>37</sup> Anders 2002, 2011. Also Cf. Vassort 2012.

<sup>38</sup> In Latin, "conservare" means "safeguard".

<sup>39</sup> It is Bergson's view. Cf. David 2006: 135–136.

<sup>40</sup> "At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true; yet at the same time, art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation. If the utopia of art were fulfilled, it would be arts temporal end". Adorno 2004: 5.

Art is a particular way the poet engages in social critique. Duanwu chooses to be a distanced witness, by following in Baudelaire's footsteps, as he comes close to being a "chiffonier", a term Walter Benjamin uses to qualify the French poet, inclined to "collect wastes of history". The novel is thus filled with passages depicting fetid waters, muddy streets, or decaying plants. These pictures give rise to "flowers of evil", tending to unearth beauty lying beneath ugliness. Therefore the poet reaffirms his individuality by sublimating the esthetic and the ethic dear to Baudelaire and Kafka as Duanwu tightly adheres to the ambivalent principle of spleen and ideal, while trying to find glimmers in obscurity.<sup>41</sup> That is why a parallel aspect also features Duanwu's posture: elitism, as showed by his musical taste. Does it reflect a form of escapism or even narcissism? Nothing could be less sure. Rather than a shelter offering calm and serenity, his artistic requirements respond to the utopian conception, as elaborated by Adorno. Certainly a multitude of artistic references show a rebellious and transgressive act which aims at preserving individuality from the effects of reification, whether in terms of kitsch, mercantile dictatorship or social utopia. However, art must be understood as truth rather than a substantialized remedy: by revealing that current society lacks something, art itself could be without content to become an "ungroundable hope". In this connection, the commentary Duanwu made of Zhai Yongming's poem "The Sadness of a Submarine" is compelling, as he expresses reservations about its end, too assertive and confident in his view, while the world seems so complex that it is full of possibilities as well as unpredictability.<sup>42</sup> The protagonist's reluctance echoes the author's reflection on Kafka's quest: despite the latter's great insight, "the way that leads to redemption remains unclear".<sup>43</sup>

---

41 Ge Fei, "Chengbao de xushi fenxi" 城堡的敘事分析 (Analysis of the narratives in "The Castle"). Cf. Ge Fei 2001: 159. "The hope is not on the fictive opposite of the darkness, but somewhere inside it". (希望不在..... 黑暗的虛擬的對立面, 而存在黑暗之中的某處). See also p. 195.

42 Zhai Yongming's poem, composed in 1999, made a reference to the serenity symbolized by the submarine, as it's isolated from agitations and favorable to the act of creating. Duanwu's commentaries are relative to the last verses: "I must make water, to create a rare beauty, for the sadness of everything" (現在我必須造水為每一件事物的悲傷製造它不可多得的完美). See Zhai 1999.

43 Ge Fei 2001: 158. "Although he (Kafka) illuminates every parts of the darkroom with his real insights, the way leading to Redemption remains nebulous and unclear". (儘管他的敏銳的洞察力照亮了暗房的一個個局部, 但通往獲救的途徑卻恍惚未明).

## 4 Conclusion

The last remark brings to light one of the most characteristic aspects of the trilogy in its framework of a utopia of human utopia. Negative utopia<sup>44</sup> clearly appears to be a prevailing theme illustrated by the constant vacillations between possibility and impossibility. The ambivalent mode which has been developed through three generations' destinies before reaching an accentuated form stems from a despairing vision of utopia, as formulated by Adorno, for whom only despair is able to save us, for a dual reason that paradoxically constitutes two essential conditions of all utopias: awareness of the lack that exists in current society and the threat to the future.<sup>45</sup> In this respect, Ge Fei's fiction suggests that the utopia which the commodity society attempts to remove from human preoccupations should come back precisely because of various threats whether they are political, cultural or ecological. That is the reason the novel is caught between elegiac and anxiously prospective tones, leading the hesitation towards its paroxysm through the treatment of the death issue.<sup>46</sup> The final poem put in the appendix could be read as an apostil, magnificently voicing the interpenetration of memory and desire.<sup>47</sup> Dedicated to Jiayu, alias Xiurong 秀蓉, the poem initially entitled The "Moon above the Sacrificial Altar" (Jitaishangde yueliang 祭台上的月亮) is rebaptized "Lotus" (Shuilian 睡莲). Rather than the Buddhist moral it hints at the Ophelia myth, as revived by the Pre-Raphaelite school of painting and by Arthur Rimbaud's poetic text.<sup>48</sup> Ge Fei sublimates the heroine's decease by transforming it into an allegory of absence/presence: "present or absent, it is as undoubted as the moonlight".<sup>49</sup> The shift of the title is neither arbitrary nor futile. As it contains in Chinese the word "sleep" (*shui* 睡), it must make it possible to imagine that the beloved is dying upon the lotus like pictorial representations of Ophelia, comparable to "Sleeping Beauty"

---

<sup>44</sup> Löwy 1992: 71–94.

<sup>45</sup> Adorno: "Car rien d'autre que le désespoir peut nous sauver", cited from Christophe 2007: 174.

<sup>46</sup> Iovene 2014: 135–162.

<sup>47</sup> The influence of T.S. Elliot is palpable. Cf the beginning of *The Waste Land*:

"April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain"

Cf. Elliot 1922.

<sup>48</sup> Rimbaud 1962 [1870].

<sup>49</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 376.

lying on the water flower. Most importantly, death portrayed as dormition by an apparently nonchalant widower reveals a paradoxical dream, which is the “expectation” and “hope”<sup>50</sup> of the community, as though the decease of his wife extracts him from himself, with reference to what Georges Bataille describes as lack, excess and ecstasy, calling for a redemptive “we”. To a certain extent, Ge Fei seems to provide the rewriting of *Tristan and Iseult* since the protagonist experiences love by losing it, before it takes place. Such a community of lovers is ultimately a metaphor of faith<sup>51</sup> in the coming community, which the novel suggests by questioning our epoch, threatened in its advent, where remain shaky possibilities of an enigmatic future.<sup>52</sup> If utopia vanished in the waste land, a human horizon remains.<sup>53</sup>

**Acknowledgments:** The first version of this study was presented at the international symposium “Utopia and Utopianism in the Contemporary Chinese Context: Texts, Ideas, Spaces” organized by the CEFC and the University of Hong Kong in March 2015. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the peer reviewers of *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* for their helpful comments and to Leigh Fergus for her careful rereading.

## Bibliography

- The Analects*. [http://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng\(13/08/2015\)](http://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng(13/08/2015)).  
 Abensour, Miguel (1997): “Utopie et démocratie”. *Raison présente* 121.  
 Adorno, T. W. (2004): *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kenton. London: Continuum.  
 Adorno, T. W./Horkheimer, Max (2002): *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford UP.  
 Agamben, Giorgio (1993): *The Coming Community. Theory of Whatever Singularity*. Translated by Michael Hardt. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.  
 Anders, Günter (2002, 2011): *L’obsolescence de l’homme*. Translated by Christophe David. Paris: Encyclopédie des nuances, t.1; Paris: Ed. Fario, t. 2.

---

<sup>50</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 375.

<sup>51</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 369. The last message sent by Xiurong in agony: “I love you. For ever. If you believe it yet”. Duanwu’s poem is, in some extent, a response to this declaration of love.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Blanchot 1988. The book provides a fine reading of Marguerite Duras’ novel, *The Malady of Death*.

<sup>53</sup> Ge Fei 2011: 374. Another verse: “Fortunately, you are always there beside the waste land”. It coincides with David Wang’s assertion about utopian subsistence from inside the waste land, in the abovementioned article.

- Blanchot, Maurice (1988): *The Unavowable Community*. Translated by Pierre Joris. New York: Station Hill Press.
- Bloch, Ernst (1989): *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature. Selected Essays*. Translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklunburg. Cambridge, MA/London: England.
- Buber, Martin (1937): *I and Thou*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Chalier, Catherine (1993): *Lévinas : l'utopie de l'humain*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Christophe, David (2007): "Nous formons une équipe triste. Notes sur Günther Anders et Theodor W. Adorno". *Tumultes* 28–29.
- Cui Hu 崔護 (fl.796): "Tiducheng Nanzhuang" 提都城南莊 (Written in a Village South of the Capital). In: *Songs of the Immortals. An Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry* (1994). Translated and versified by XU YUAN ZHONG. New York: Penguin Books in Association with New World Press.
- David, Christophe (2006): "De l'homme utopique à l'utopie négative". *Mouvements* 45–46.
- Elliot, T.S (1922): *The Waste Land*. <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/waste-land> (04/06/2015).
- Engels, Friedrich (1888): "Preface to The 1888 English Edition". In: Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich (1988): *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>.
- Fourier, Charles (1829): *Le Nouveau Monde industriel et sociétaire ou les séries passionnées*. Paris: Bossange Père.
- Gabel, Joseph (1997): *Ideologies and the Corruption of Thought*. Edited by Alan Sica. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Ge Fei (2001): *Sairen de gesheng* 塞壬的歌聲 (The Siren Songs). Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi chubanshe.
- Ge Fei 格非 (2004–2011): *Jiangnan sanbuqu* 江南三部曲 (Jiangnan Trilogy). Shenyang: Chunfeng Wenyi Chubanshe; Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe; Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe.
- Ge Fei 格非 (2004): *Renmian taohua* 人面桃花 (Peach Blossom Beauty). Shenyang: Chunfeng Wenyi Chubanshe.
- Ge Fei 格非 (2007): *Shanhe rumeng* 山河入夢 (Landscapes in Dream). Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe.
- Ge Fei 格非 (2011): *Chunjin Jiangnan* 春盡江南 (End of Spring in Jiangnan). Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe.
- Iovene, Paola (2014): *Tales of Futures Past, Anticipation and Ends of Literature in Contemporary China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kinkley, Jeffrey C. (2014): *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel (1999): *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Liezi. [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Taoist\\_teachings\\_from\\_the\\_book\\_of\\_Lieh\\_Tz%C5%AD/Book\\_5](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Taoist_teachings_from_the_book_of_Lieh_Tz%C5%AD/Book_5) (04052015).
- Löwy, Michael (1992): *Redemption and Utopia. Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe*. Translated by Hope Heaney. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mao Zedong (1945): "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains". [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3\\_26.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_26.htm) (04/05/2015)
- Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf> (04/05/2015).



- Nancy, Jean-Luc (1991): *The Inoperative Community*. Translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (2001): *La Communauté affrontée*. Paris: Galilée.
- Orwell, George (1961 [1949]): *1984*, New York: New American Library/Signet Classics.
- Rimbaud, Arthur (1962): *Collected Poems*. Translated by Oliver Bernard. New York: Penguin. [<http://www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/poesies/Ophelia.html>]
- Ruyer, Raymond (1950): *L'Utopie et les utopistes*. Paris: PUF.
- Songs of the Immortals. An Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry* (1994). Translated and versified by XU YUAN ZHONG. New York: Penguin Books in Association with New World Press.
- Wang, David Der-wer (2013): “Wutuobang lide huangyuan – Ge Fei Chunjin jiangnan” 烏托邦裡的荒原 – 格非 « 春盡江南 » (The Waste Land within the Utopia: about Ge Fei's *End of Spring in Jiangnan*). *Dushu 讀書 (Read)* 7.
- The Works of Mencius*. Translated by James Legge. <http://ctext.org/mengzi/gong-sun-chou-i> (13/08/2015).
- Vassort, Patrick (2012): *L'homme superflu. Théorie politique de la crise en cours*. Neuvy-en-Champagne: Le passager clandestin.
- Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (1999): “Qianshuiting de beishang 潛水艇的悲傷” (The Sadness of a Submarine). <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/02/06/2015>.
- Zhuangzi*. <http://ctext.org/zhuangzi/lie-yu-kou> (11/10/2015).